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ABSTRACT

Examples of authentic English speech generally include a variety of English writing as well as the English in which both native and non-native speakers communicate. Authentic language is commonly defined by the language teaching profession as that which has not been spoken or written specifically for language teaching. This definition could be considered too narrow because when non-native speakers communicate in English, they are probably using the English they learned in textbooks. At this point, the question arises of abandoning or of redefining the notion of authentic language. On one end of the spectrum, authentic English is that which immigrants have to learn, the English they hear and see all around them. On the other end of the spectrum, authentic English is language used by non-native speakers to communicate with other non-native speakers. It seems therefore that insistence on authenticity in any narrow sense should be dropped. However, there are two reservations. First, authenticity might be seen as a feature of any piece of English which has been used in some kind of successful communication. Secondly, authentic English should be speech that is comprehensible to native speakers in any part of the world. (AMH)

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The Defenestration of 'Authenticity'

W. R. Lee

'Authenticity' is one of those terms, like 'ability to communicate', which haunts the EFL/ESL scene today, just as other terms, such as 'structural grading', haunted it yesterday. Unless of course one is on really good terms with one's ghost, I doubt whether it's a good thing to be haunted. But 'authenticity' (the word) gives me a guilty feeling. I ought to understand what it signifies before going along with it, or making off in the opposite direction, or trying to negotiate. Ought we to be 'authentic' in our teaching at all times? Are we ignorant, despicable, and (even worse) out-of-date creatures if we decide that we need not.

But what is meant by 'authenticity' in EFL/ESL teaching, and does everybody who uses this term mean the same thing? Commonly, within the profession, 'authenticity' refers to the use of English by native speakers of English - British, American, Australian, Canadian, and so on - and it is a quality of teaching materials, i.e. of the English used in speech or writing and at any stage of achievement (from elementary to advanced) in course-books and during English lessons.

Examples of 'authentic' English speech (as used in teaching) include tape recordings of genuine conversations among native speakers of English, of talks and lectures given by native speakers, and of broadcast programmes put out in countries where English is the first language. Be it noted that already a great variety of English has been mentioned here - for the speakers are of all ages and from many social backgrounds and the utterances have various aims and are adapted to a wide range of listeners.

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Examples of 'authentic' English writing or print include private and business letters, newspaper articles, public notices and advertisements, leaflets handed out in the street, and all sorts of language 'realia', plus, I suppose, literature in the usual sense of the word, although this is less frequently mentioned. And once again, here is a tremendous variety of English, written for a tremendous variety of reasons. Some of it may even have been produced with non-English readers in mind.

Negatively, 'authentic' language is commonly defined as language which has not been spoken or written specifically for language teaching. It may be used as teaching material, but it has not been produced as such.

This, I guess, is the prevailing view of 'authenticity', and let us notice again the very great diversity of 'authentic' English, which does not necessarily encompass a lot of um's and er's and changes of construction, or slang or colloquialisms familiar only within limited environments of use, or specialised terms of similar restricted intelligibility. On the contrary, English can be translated into other English, so that hesitations and syntactic disorder are eased out, or, conversely, added in order perhaps to avoid sounding unduly stiff or formal. 'Gobbledegook', which I take to be the unnecessarily involved and clumsy, and sometimes almost meaningless, language of many public announcements and official communications, can with patience be re-worded to make its meaning clearer to the reader. Similar clarification can be given to learned papers which legitimately make use, for brevity's sake, of specialised terms for a restricted readership: sometimes these can be re-written at greater length in order to be more widely understood. Such 'translations', when carried out by native users of English for the benefit of native users of English, clearly result in English no less 'authentic', in the commonest sense of the term, than the English they were 'translated' from.

But let us carry the argument a step further, as it seems necessary to do, and afterwards a step beyond that.

The varieties of English in use among native speakers of English, even in one country, are numerous. Native speakers try to communicate with one another, and in doing so adapt and modify the English they use, and sometimes 'translate' from one kind of English to another. Undoubtedly all this is 'authentic', if we use that term: it is what native speakers of English do among themselves, and that, we are told, is what matters and is what we have to teach. But there is also the English in which native speakers communicate with non-native speakers, and this is clearly not of marginal importance: even within Britain it is central and necessary. Why is this less 'authentic', if it is? It appears to be entirely arbitrary to assume so.

Furthermore, there is the English in which non-native speakers try to communicate with non-native speakers, and such speakers predominate, English being the world language it is. What grounds can there be for describing this kind of English - and again it is extremely diversified - as 'unauthentic'? I would think no reasonable grounds.

In all this, however, it can still be said that, although we are no longer limited to native speakers of English communicating variously among themselves, at least we are not talking about the English of textbooks. But is this really so, seeing that textbooks, even when mediated by a teacher and supplemented by recordings, are the main source of English for vast numbers of learners? This is especially true of elementary learners, who are least likely, except in a few countries, to be in regular contact with native speakers, whether in person or by phone or letter or by listening to radio. Most learners of English, in my view, since only a

small minority reach what any native or highly accomplished speaker would call an advanced stage, communicate in something like the English of their textbooks. Rather than ask how closely this English resembles the English commonly used by any native speakers among themselves, we should instead perhaps ask how well they can do so.

Is it now time, therefore, to get hold of 'authenticity' by both legs and heave it out of the window? Is the moment of defenestration at hand? No - wait a minute - hold on! It is not all that simple, and a part-reprieve may be on the way. One or two matters need to be straightened out.

Firstly, if immigrants are going to live in York (England) or York (USA) or York (Australia) or Yorktown (Canada), they may not need to sound like Englishmen, Americans, Australians, or Canadians, but they will need quite soon to make adequate sense of at least some of the English they hear and see all around them, and any rational instruction they receive will concentrate to begin with on listening to and reading the sort of English used in the everyday life at hand and at their places of work, and also on helping them to make themselves understood locally in intelligible and reasonably acceptable English on essential day-to-day matters, as when shopping, travelling, visiting offices, and so on. In other words, 'authentic' English in a fairly narrow sense is what they must get to know. But notice that this includes the English that native speakers use in communicating with non-native speakers, for not all native speakers (only perhaps a substantial minority) are able to modify their speech or writing to accommodate those with a more elementary command than themselves and thus ensure that the effort to communicate is fully bilateral. By the way, there is an all too brief article on some of the adjustments native and non-native speakers make in communicating with one another - 'Interviews between native speakers and non-native speakers as material for listening comprehension', by Ann Simpson, in ELT Journal, XXXV, 4, July 1981. The author draws cautious

but extremely interesting conclusions: '... it is perhaps possible to speculate that it may well be part of our communicative competence to adjust our speech to take into account the linguistic knowledge which we attribute to non-native speakers. If this is the case, then this is the kind of language with which non-native speakers will inevitably come in contact, and therefore interviews between non-native speakers and native speakers are the most naturalistic and authentic type of listening materials with which we can provide our learners. The standard type of interview between two or more native speakers is unnecessarily difficult for non-native speakers and for many of them is simply analogous to eavesdropping.' Yes, indeed, and not only perhaps difficult but unnecessary, except for those who need to communicate on more or less equal terms with native speakers. Ann Simpson continues: 'Indeed, it is not difficult to envisage contexts in which interaction in English between two non-native speakers is the norm.' Yes.

So where have we got to? We are immobilised at the window, about to pitch 'authenticity' out onto the rubbish dump of language-teaching theory below. Then we remember that of course 'authentic' English (in the narrow sense) is just what immigrants and certain others most need. The 'certain others' include those who regularly, and in any part of the world, need to communicate on more or less equal terms with native speakers, many of whom are disinclined to make linguistic concessions and inclined to see English as the English they themselves use. There are special categories of immigrants, such as hospital doctors, whose command and understanding of English may seriously affect the lives of those they come in contact with professionally, and the fact that their patients do survive may be accounted for partly by the patients' ability, and no doubt often the doctor's, to translate 'authentic' English, larded with slang and colloquialisms and local turns of phrase, into plainer and

more widely intelligible English - not that the protective device of tests of doctors' command of English plays no role. As for short-term visitors, including business people and tourists, it depends on how often they come (or go) to an English-speaking country, on what kind of people they need or wish to communicate with, and how deeply they wish to penetrate the life and culture of the English-speaking country to which they go (or come). Many tourists need no more than an 'authentic' minimum, so that if they are lost they can find their way back to the hotel.

At the other extreme from these groups of learners are those who need their English rarely to communicate with native speakers but for whom it is a useful means of communication with other non-native speakers who do not speak their own language. Often this is occupational English or tourist English, and in numerous and dissimilar countries - European, African, Asian - this takes place on a large scale. Many such speakers have only an occasional need to cope with English as spoken among British, American, Canadian, Australian, or other native speakers. When the opportunity or need arises to visit an English-speaking country, specialised instruction, with heavy emphasis on listening practice and also on vocabulary work, should be obtainable.

My own view is that judgements passed on the 'authenticity' of coursebook texts are often irrelevant and unreasonable. Observations of the type 'People do not talk that way in Britain' or 'You would never hear a conversation like that in Oxford Street' are so common that it is unnecessary to quote. Textbooks are scrutinised and condemned for 'unauthentic' English almost as if teaching English were nothing but teaching people to imitate what the British or the American or other English-speaking peoples do with English - and often the imitation attaches itself, incidentally, to no particularly skilful performers and seems

at times to attend unduly to trivialities. English is not in these days a British possession, nor an American possession, nor anybody else's possession. It is at the service of mankind, and people everywhere use it in different ways for different purposes, adapting it as they go along.

Insistence on 'authenticity' in any narrow sense is a passing fashion, but one which has lasted too long. Out of the window with 'authenticity', ^{then,} except for those going to stay in an English-speaking country or for those who, in Gardner and Lambert's term, have a dominantly integrative motivation in their language learning. Otherwise, it has little relevance: or perhaps I should say, in gentler language, there are reasons for doubting whether it is altogether relevant.

There are two further reservations, however.

If 'authenticity' is to be seen not as a characteristic of native-speakers' use of the language, but as a feature of any piece of English which has been used in some kind of successful communication - whether among native speakers or not - then that is a different matter, but it does not necessarily exclude the language of the course-books, much of which provides a serviceable communicative means, discoverable as such during language lessons, and a basis for communication among non-native speakers and also to some extent between non-native and native speakers.

How far also - and this is the other reservation - can we go? Two minor examples only - for lack of time. I am coming from the Greece (for I come from Greece) and He was too pleased to see her (for very pleased) are both comprehensible in context, but who is going to teach them or for that matter leave them uncorrected, except temporarily? If the English in which non-native speakers of English succeed in communicating is unintelligible to native speakers, or unintelligible in other areas of the world, all one can say is that it is a

disadvantage and a pity, since the importance of English as a lingua franca potentially available everywhere to everybody is thereby reduced. Emphatically I am not suggesting that just anything should be taught and learnt. How much can be omitted that is normally taught and what needs to be insisted on - these are not questions often discussed, (see, however, Randolph Quirk's 'International communication and the concept of nuclear English',⁽¹⁾), and they are not easy to answer. I attempt no answer here, but ask only for a fresh look at 'authenticity' (so-called). My view is that far too much has been made of it.

(1) In English for Cross-Cultural Communication, ed. Larry E. Smith, publ. Macmillan, 1981.